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ABSTRACT

A survey of 258 black, Hispanic and white students in grades 7 to 9 was undertaken in Racine, Wisconsin, to determine student perceptions regarding their neighborhood community center and to discover differences in attendance patterns among the three ethnic groups. The subjects responded to a questionnaire which elicited information on frequency of attendance, whether the subject attended alone or with a companion, and the types of activities desired at the center. Survey results indicated that while half of the respondents attend their neighborhood centers, nearly three fourths of the Hispanic and white students do not attend at all. The study suggests that an effective outreach/recruiting program, as well as the addition of some evening and more participatory activities, would attract more students and enhance the integration of the centers. (MJL)

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JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF NEIGHBORHOOD COMMUNITY CENTERS IN RACINE, WISCONSIN

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JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF NEIGHBORHOOD COMMUNITY CENTERS IN A MIDWEST INDUSTRIAL CITY

This study investigated junior high school student participation in six neighborhood community centers in Racine, Wisconsin. Questionnaires were randomly distributed among 258 black, Hispanic, and white junior high school students in grades 7 through 9. Frequency distributions were used to analyze the data. Findings showed that, among the three groups, black students were most likely to attend their neighborhood center and that Hispanic students were least likely to attend.

INTRODUCTION. Directors of community centers understandably prefer to believe that the services their respective organizations offer the local community are essential to the general welfare of the youth as well as the community as a whole. At the same time, they are well aware that their perceptions of the role of the center may not necessarily correspond to either that of persons in the larger community or the intended clientele of the services. A second assumption that these directors often make is that the services provided by their centers are equally available to all youth living in the neighborhood, regardless of ethnic or racial background. Furthermore, they assume that the services provided will be equally appealing to all members of the same age cohort and to all racial groups.

From a different perspective, the youth clientele may have a favorable image of the center and its role in the community. Others

may not, based on what they have heard from friends or family members who have experienced contact with the center. Still other youth may hold a completely negative attitude toward all community centers regardless of their offerings or location. The reasons for these perceptions will, of course, vary.

Racine, the third largest city in Wisconsin, has emerged as a major industrial center. Founded in 1834 on the western side of Lake Michigan between Milwaukee and Chicago, the city is well-known for its manufacturing. Perhaps the better known of these industries include J.I. Case Co., S.C. Johnson and Sons (Johnson's Wax), and Western Printing. Besides the production of tractors, farm implements, and wax products, Racine is also a producer of articles as varied as automobile equipment, malted milk, and leather apparel. With such a diversity of industrial jobs, Racine has been able to attract and hold a large number of immigrant and migrant workers (Shannon & Shannon, 1973). The 1970 U.S. Census lists Racine as having a total population of 95,123. Of this, it is interesting to note that nearly 20 percent of the population (16,534) were second generation born of foreign or mixed parentage (1970 U.S. Census). Racine has also attracted a large Black (19.5%) and Hispanic (4%) population.

Racine also has the unique distinction of being one of the first Midwestern school districts to voluntarily desegregate its educational system. This they did without the fanfare that has characterized other districts (U.S. Comm. on Civil Rights, 1977). A 1980-81 ethnic data school report listed the Racine Unified School

District as having the second largest minority student population in Wisconsin, second only to Milwaukee. During this same period the Racine Unified School District showed a student population of 16,661 white, 3,745 black, and 1,611 Hispanic students. These figures represent 76.2 percent white, 16.8 percent black, and 7.0 percent Hispanic (Racine Unified School District, 1981). Recognizing that Hispanics are not a distinct racial group, but rather a national-origin category, throughout this study we will use the term racial category to include Hispanics.

METHODOLOGY. During the Spring of 1981, 238 black, Hispanic, and white junior high students in grades 7 through 9 were surveyed. The focus of the study was to determine student perceptions toward their neighborhood community center. Furthermore, the authors wanted to discover any significant differences in attendance patterns among the three racial groups. A questionnaire was devised to measure students' perception of the various community centers (see Appendix). Data was also obtained on reasons for attending and for not attending. The projected random sample of fifty black, Hispanic, and white junior high school students from each school was not reached due to absenteeism, void questionneers, and student preference not to participate in the survey.

Students were surveyed from two junior high schools: James F. Gilmore, located at 2201 High Street and Mitchell Junior High, located at 2701 Drexel Avenue. These schools were selected because their respective population approximates the racial percentages

represented in the school district. Gilmore Junior High School shows a racial distribution of 79.6 percent white, 12.0 percent black, and 8.0 percent Hispanic for the 1980-81 school year. Mitchell Junior High School shows a somewhat higher minority population with 66.5 percent white, 25.0 percent black, and 8.0 percent Hispanic for the same time period. It was also necessary to select schools where there was a sufficient number of Hispanic students to permit random sampling.

Respondents were evenly divided both among all grades and among the three racial categories. Thirty-three percent of the respondents were in the 7th grade, 34 percent in the 8th grade, and 33 percent in the 9th grade; 31 percent of the respondents were Hispanic, 33 percent black, and 36 percent white. Survey data was analyzed using frequency distributions of raw scores and percentages.

Six neighborhood centers were identified by the researchers. All of the centers are run by the City of Racine Park and Recreation Department. The centers were: Breakthru Neighborhood Center, Dr. John Bryant Neighborhood Center, Douglas Park Community House, Humble Park Community Center, Lakeview Community Center, and Washington Park Recreation Center. The general purpose of these community centers, as expressed by one community center brochure, is "to provide services that meet the needs and interests of the total community". Services at these community centers usually include referral and outreach services in education, employment training, housing, legal assistance, youth, and recreational activities. Offerings are available from the preschool level through the adult

level, depending on the center. At several centers a library is maintained. Educational services include classes in such areas as ceramics, sewing, upholstery, tutoring in basic skills, and English-as-a-Second Language classes. For junior high students the major offerings fall into the categories of social activities, special cultural events, educational activities, and sports-related activities such as basketball, pool, table tennis, softball, volleyball, karate, bicycling and jogging.

FINDINGS. Figure 1 presents a pie chart of the six community centers and their approximate location superimposed upon a map of the city of Racine. Each pie graphically represents the percentages of respondents who indicated on the questionnaire that they lived near the center. For example, 30 percent of all respondents live near Humble Park, in contrast to only 5 percent who live near Lakeview.

Each pie is divided into the three racial categories - black, Hispanic, and white. A break-down by racial groups is enlightening in that it allows us to see which areas of the city appear to be more segregated. The divisions are based on the percentages of each racial group who indicated that they live near that center. Nearly three-fourths of the respondents (71%) lived near three community centers - Humble Park, Breakthru, and Douglas Park.

Among the total respondents, a high percentage of Black respondents live near Breakthru (14%) and Bryant (10%). White junior high students responded that they live near Douglas Park (15%) and Humble

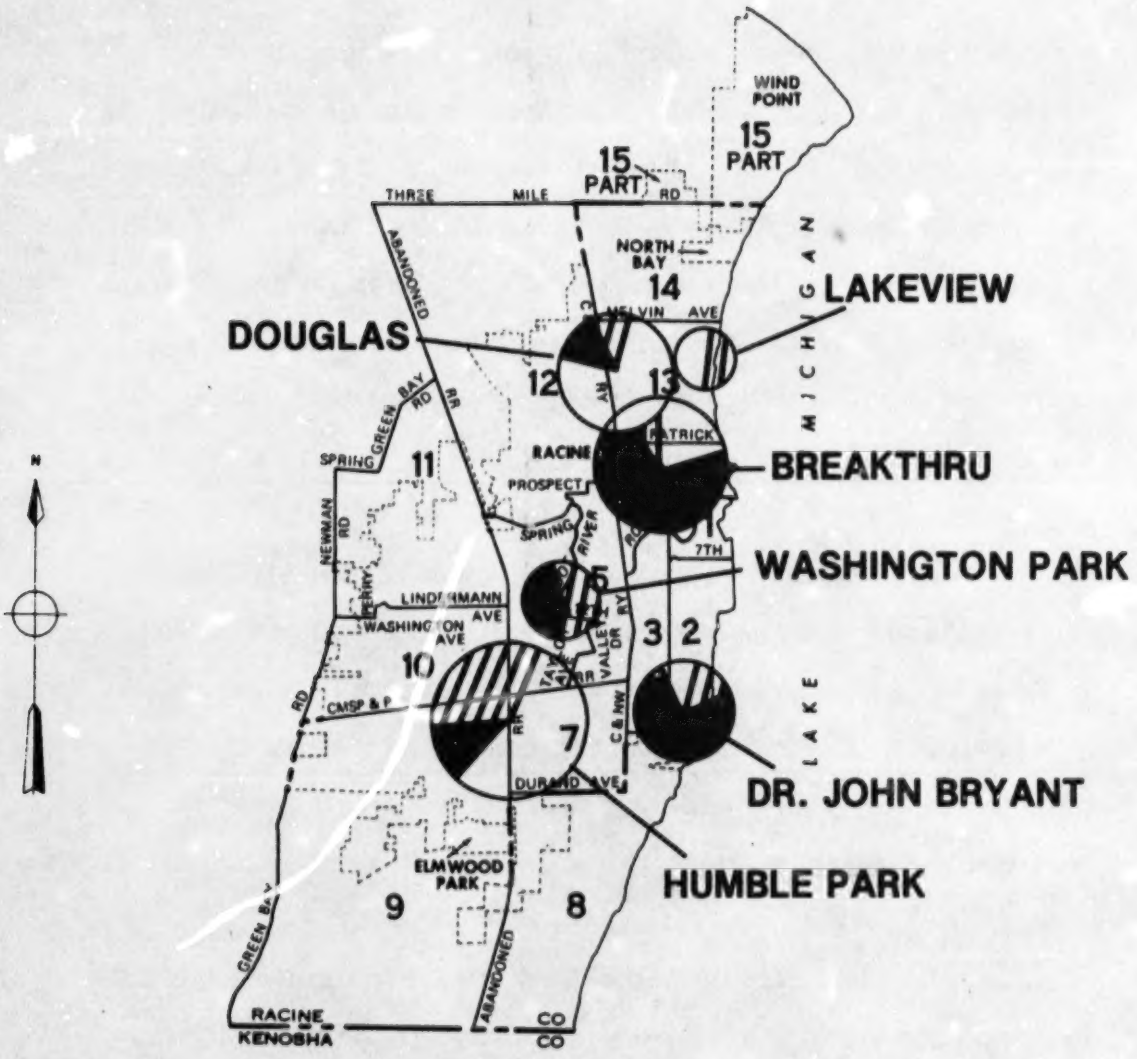


FIGURE 1

NEIGHBORHOOD RACIAL DISTRIBUTION BY COMMUNITY CENTER

Park (15%). Hispanic students surveyed also live near Humble Park (10%) as well as Breakthru (8%). It is clear from Figure 1 that Hispanics reside throughout the city. Furthermore, it appears evident that Hispanics are, in each neighborhood, the second largest racial group.

Attendance Patterns. While half of the respondents indicated that they attend their neighborhood community center, this figure is misleading. Among respondents who go to their local community center, 86 percent of the blacks attend while only 30 percent of the Hispanics and 34 percent of the whites attend (see Table I). In other words, nearly 60 percent of the total attendance figure is based on black student responses.

TABLE I

ATTENDANCE BY RACE

Race	Students Attending		Students not Attending	
	%	N	%	N
Black	57.0	73	43.8	57
Hispanic	18.7	24	9.3	12
White	24.2	31	46.9	61
Total	100.0	128	100.0	130

Among the respondents who do go to community centers, 49 percent frequent the center at least once a week, 13 percent said they at-

tend monthly, and 38 percent answered that they go only several times throughout the year. Black respondents (67%) are more likely to attend on a regular weekly basis in contrast to whites (17%) and Hispanics (46%). The majority of white respondents who answered that they did attend said that they did so infrequently, i.e. several times per year (60%).

Among those respondents attending community centers, 93 percent indicated that they go with a friend. There was little variance between the three different racial groups. As junior high school students peer interaction is strong at this age. Research on clique membership suggests that this is a normal part of adolescent development (Hollingshead, 1949; Dunphy, 1963). Thus, it is not surprising to find that only 7 percent of the total attend community centers alone and that this tendency was evident through all groups.

Students who frequent their community centers were asked to indicate reasons for attending. Choices listed on the questionnaire were: 1) education, 2) sports, and 3) special events. The students' responses indicated that there was a minimal interest in educational classes or special events. Only 6 students out of the total 258 indicated that they attended their community center for educational purposes or for special events. It would be obviously presumptuous to analyze any racial breakdown from within this total.

An overwhelming majority of the students who attend community centers indicated that they do so for athletic activities. Of those 115 who answered that they attended for sports, 15 were Hispanic (13

percent), 71 were black (61 percent), and 28 were white (25 percent). Research on youth participation in athletic activities shows that such activities attract people "from all classes in about the same proportion" (Hollingshead, 1949; 194).

Nonattendance. Half of the respondents answered that they do not attend their neighborhood community center. A look at nonattendance patterns by race shows that 70 percent of the Hispanics, 66 percent of the white respondents, and 14 percent of the blacks do not attend (see Figure 2). Of the three racial groups, Hispanic students are the least likely to attend community centers.

The following reasons were offered by respondents for not attending the community center in their neighborhood. These are listed in order of rank:

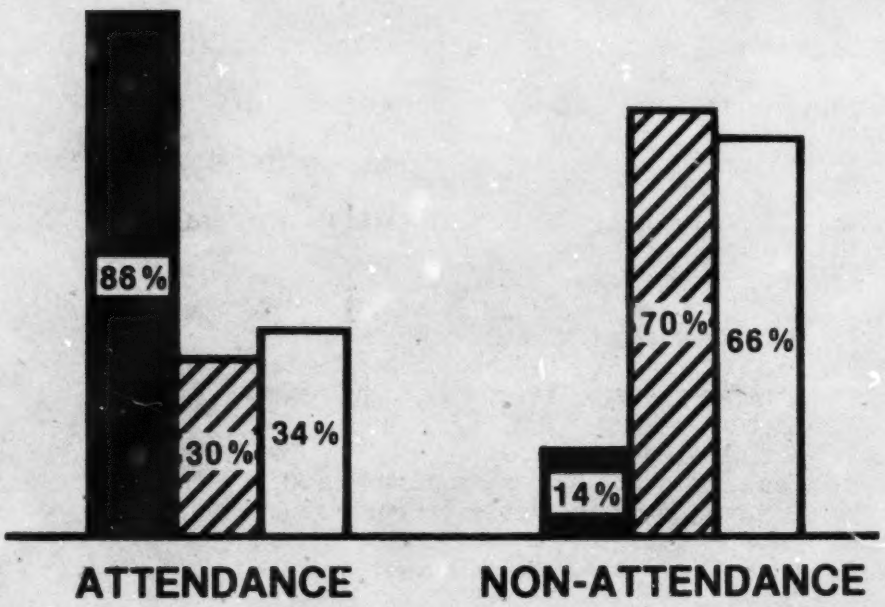
1) Friends did not attend;
2) Did not feel comfortable at the centers;
3) Other responsibilities had to be met;
4) Distance;
5) Not invited to attend;
6) Few people of the same race attended;
7) Did not enjoy the activities offered;
8) Lack of parental approval; and
9) Cost of program activities.

Among the Hispanic youth, limited English-language skills was not an issue. There were less than five Hispanic students at each junior high who spoke minimal or no English. Other than English-as-a-Second Language classes, which are offered for adults at one center, none of the centers have activities oriented toward Spanish dominant students.

The major reasons listed by both Hispanics and blacks for not attending their neighborhood community center were: 1) They did not

FIGURE 2

ATTENDANCE AND NON-ATTENDANCE BY RACE



feel comfortable at the center, 2) Their friends didn't attend, 3) Other responsibilities such as work, had to be met, and 4) Few people of the same race attended. These reasons accounted for nearly 65 percent of all possible choices for the minority groups.

On the other hand, white respondents listed as their major reasons: 1) The absence of friends who attended, 2) Distance from the center, 3) Other responsibilities, and 4) They were not invited (see Table II).

TABLE II

REASONS FOR NOT ATTENDING

Reason	Black (N=10) %	Hispanic (N=53) %	White (N=53) %
Friends don't attend	21.2	16.6	21.6
Don't feel comfortable at center	26.3	19.5	9.8
Other responsibilities	10.5	15.6	15.7
Distance	5.3	10.8	16.7
Not invited to attend	10.5	10.8	15.7
Few people of same race attend	10.5	12.7	4.9
Don't enjoy activities	5.4	6.0	8.8
Lack of parental approval	10.3	6.0	3.9
Programs to costly	0	2.0	2.9
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

Twenty five percent of all Hispanics surveyed listed that they did not attend their neighborhood community center because of the lack of racial cohorts, followed by 20 percent of the blacks. This contrasted with white student respondents among whom only 9 percent answered that they did not attend because few people of the same race attended. This is further corroborated by peer attendance. White students attend centers predominantely in white neighborhoods, thus affording them little out-of-school contact with other racial groups. The Shannons (1973) have shown that peers tend to be from the same racial groups thus allowing us to conclude that race is indeed an important factor in attendance patterns.

Few students among all three racial groups cited program costs, lack of parental approval, or that they did not enjoy the activities as reasons for not attending.

Activities Desired. Students were asked to indicate no more than three activities they would like to see offered at their community center. Students suggested that:

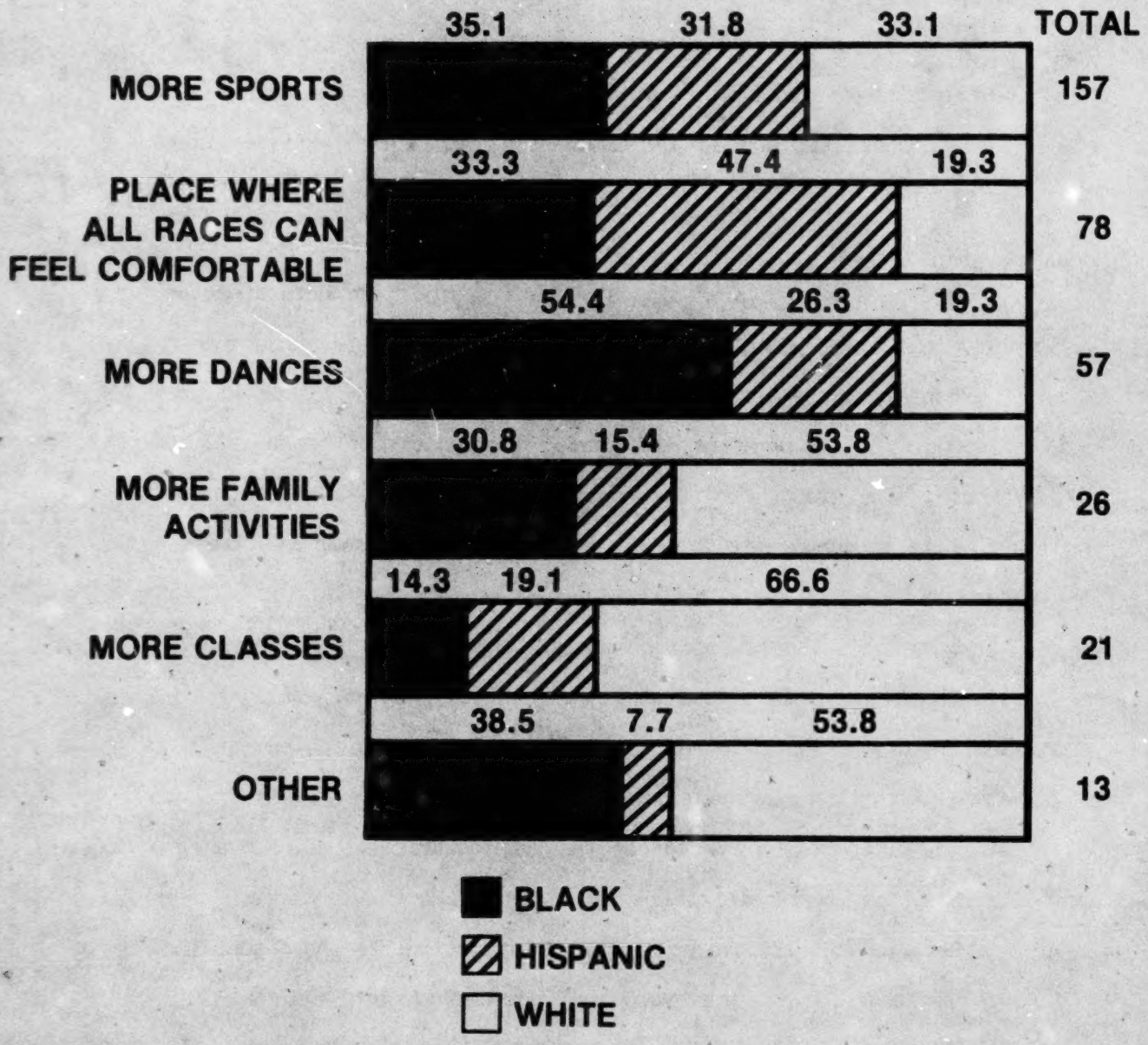
1) More athletic activities be offered (44.6%);
2) The center be made more racially comfortable (22.2%);
3) More dances be offered (16.2%);
4) More family activities be offered (7.3%);
5) More classes be offered (5.0%).

Figure 3 provides racial distribution of the activities students would like to have offered at their neighborhood center. Blacks (35.1%), Hispanics (31.8%), and whites (33.1%) all agree that more athletic activities should be provided at the centers.

The second most-selected choice by students was that they would like to have a center where all races could feel more comfortable.

FIGURE 3

PROGRAM OFFERINGS DESIRED BY YOUTH



Nearly half of those youth who responded to this choice were Hispanic. More than twice as many Hispanics indicated that this racial issue was important than did their white counterparts. These findings are similar to those found by the Shannons (1973). As was seen in Figure 1, there is no community center attended by a majority of the Hispanic youth. They are in a minority at each of the community centers. Students also indicated that they would like to have more dances offered at the community centers. Black students listed this response two and a half times more than whites and two times more than Hispanics.

CONCLUSION. The preceding study was designed to determine junior high school youth perceptions toward their neighborhood community center. Data were assembled in the Spring of 1981 in Racine, Wisconsin, a Midwestern industrial community of some 100,000 people. The group studied consisted of 85 black, 81 Hispanic, and 92 white students enrolled in two junior high schools in grades 7 through 9.

Students lived near six community centers. While 50 percent of all the respondents attend their neighborhood center, nearly three-fourths of the Hispanic and white respondents do not attend at all. Among the major reasons given for not attending were: 1) Friends did not attend, 2) They did not feel comfortable attending the center, 3) Other responsibilities had to be met, and 4) Distance.

Research on Hispanic community participation has shown that they are apprehensive to join voluntary community organizations due in

part to racial and linguistic discrimination (Shannon & Shannon, 1973). This has been corroborated by our study. Only 30 percent of the Hispanics surveyed attend their community center and only 46 percent of this group attend on a regular weekly basis. Hispanic students are more likely to answer that they did not attend their neighborhood centers because they did not feel comfortable than were white and black students. When asked what activities they would like offered at their community center, Hispanic students mentioned that they would like a place where all races could feel more comfortable. It is possible that these community centers do not provide the mechanisms necessary for effective communication between the various racial groups. It is true, of course, that while the centers profess to be integrated, and indeed they are to some degree (see Figure 1), nonetheless, the majority of the centers are oriented toward and attended by a specific racial clientele.

In 1961 the Shannons also surveyed (1973: 161-167) black and white respondents on changes and improvements needed in Racine. It is noteworthy that at that time, 3 percent of the black respondents and 10 percent of the white respondents answered that there was a need for more recreational facilities. Based upon students' perception in this study, there appears to be the same need for more recreational facilities twenty years later. There are several reasons which may account for this continued need. First, school recreational events with their stress on inter-collegiate athletics are generally more spectator-oriented than participatory. This limits student participation to a small number. Second, many com-

munity centers have few evening activities. Students who must meet other obligations are often not able to use the facilities. Third, the centers themselves have not attempted to reach the students living within their area. Recreational facilities and activities continue to be in demand.

Most community center directors profess a policy that it is up to the clientele to come to "us". This may be due, in part, to the fact that the centers are managed by the city government, and thus they view themselves as bureaucrats rather than public servants attempting to meet the needs of the community. Most center directors also make certain assumptions that their activities provide the services that their clientele wants. It is possible, as seen by this study, that an effective outreach/recruiting program as well as the addition of some evening and more participatory activities might possibly attract more students and at the same time do more to integrate the centers.

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APPENDIX

Grade_____ May, 1981

QUESTIONNAIRE

1) From your home, what is the nearest community center?

_____ Washington Park
_____ Breakthru
_____ John Bryant
_____ Douglas Park
_____ Humble Park
_____ Lakeview

2) Do you attend the center?

_____Yes

If yes, how often?

_____ daily
_____ weekly
_____ monthly
_____ several times per year

with whom?

_____ parent
_____ friend
_____ alone

why do you attend?

_____ education (classes, etc.)
-What classes do you take?
_____

_____ recreation (sports)
-What sports?
_____

_____ special events

_____No

If no, indicate reasons for not attending.
(Check all that apply.)

_____ Distance
_____ No one has invited me.
_____ I don't feel comfortable.
_____ Other responsibilities (parttime job, family babysitting, etc.)
_____ I don't enjoy the activities.
_____ My parents don't approve.
_____ Cost of programs.
_____ There are few people of my race at the centers.

_____ Other. Please list reasons for not attending.

_____

_____

3) Race

_____ Hispanic
_____ Black
_____ White
_____ Other

4) What would you like to have offered at a community center? (Check all that apply.)

_____ More classes.
_____ More sports.
_____ More family activities.
_____ More dances.
_____ A place where all races would feel comfortable.
_____ Other. Please list.

_____
_____
_____
_____

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